GROUNDWORK: THE ADVENT OF THE INDIGENOUS PRINT IN AUSTRALIA

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The collection of first-generation prints made by Aboriginal and Torres Strait artists at the Australian National University School of Art confirms the place of innovation in contemporary Indigenous art and culture. Whereas in the last two decades of the 20th century the most renowned instance of new developments in Indigenous art was associated with central desert painting and the adoption of the new medium of synthetic pigments on canvas, the work of Indigenous printmakers has been steadily gaining recognition for its inherently innovative cross-cultural character. As well as demonstrating the diversity of practices and enthusiastic adoption of new technologies, all of which took place relatively independently of the debates on the centre stage, Indigenous artists have also used the experience of new media to investigate new subjects.[1]

The issues of originality and authenticity strike a particular cultural resonance with the political and economic circumstances of art in contemporary Indigenous society since the 1970s. For the Indigenous artist, the coincidence of innovations in form and content, whereby the medium is neither simply a means to an end nor the end in itself, addresses anew the character of printmaking as distinct from all other artistic media.

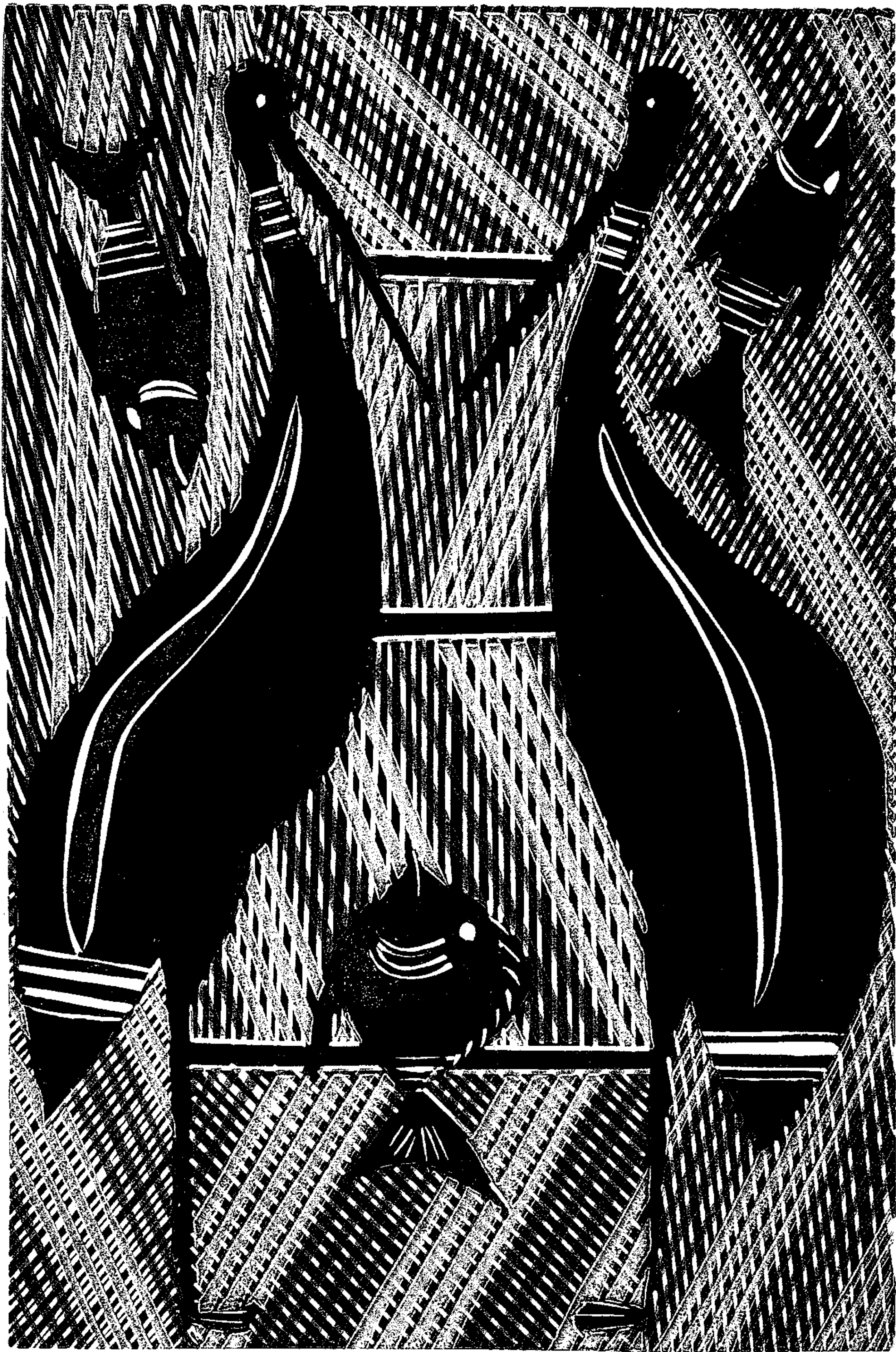
In the mainstream of the (non-Indigenous) print, the currency of the debate still engages a kind of fetishisation of materials and processes, where aesthetic pleasure can be gained in the almost microscopic examination of the subject, and the demonstration of reproductive technologies for its own sake. In the continuity of such practices, individual manifestations of innovation, virtuosity, idiosyncracy and signature effects can be read in the materials of printmaking as a sign of displacement and distancing – as a contemplative rather than a mimetic strategy – and as a relatively arcane subset of mainstream contemporary art.

It is the use of the same materials by Indigenous artists which has emerged as one of the most significant new developments of Australian art of the past quarter century. This aspect mirrors other developments in work by Indigenous artists since the early seventies, through the influence of arts and crafts advisers, access to technicians and master printers, as well as an engagement with the new technologies of communication and marketing, and new cultural institutions and audiences.

One could argue that each print by an Indigenous artist arises from a different order of necessity from that of the non-Indigenous prints of the mainstream. Arguably the latter are predominantly concerned with an ongoing engagement with both modernist and traditional forms of representation, or with imagery which explores a conscious manipulation of the reproductive process as its subject. For the Indigenous artist, the motivation to make prints derives neither from a challenge to tradition, nor from the debates which address new media as socially constructing phenomena, nor from the process of reproduction as an end or subject in itself. To the first generation of Indigenous printmakers, these are all foreign tongues. Equally, the ironic devaluation of the sign, the commodification of vision, the creation of the spectator as a decultured, ahistorical subject, all appear beyond the horizon of the concerns of the Indigenous artists represented in this collection. In the first phase of this development these images seem totally out of step with the self-absorption and neurotic pursuit of originality of such late modernist or postmodern consciousness.

page 174:
Banduk MARIKA
b. Yirrkala, NT, 1954
Marrma Gayntjurr, 1985
linocut from two blocks
TT, the artist, (14/20) signed
18 x 12 cm
ANU School of Art Collection

left:
Banduk MARIKA
b. Yirrkala, NT, 1954
Myapunawu Narruna (Turtle Hunting at Bremer Island), 1989
linocut, 58 x 57 cm
W/P, RG, the artist, signed and dated
ANU School of Art Collection



Remember also that this extraordinary flowering of the Indigenous engagement with what are essentially 19th or early 20th century technologies (etching, lithography, the linocut or the screen-print) took place at precisely the same time as the demise of analogue and the rise of digital technologies. These prints were being made at the same time as the internet was being invented in the 1980s. And it was not until the late 80s that digital imagery began to take hold as the visual technology of the future. When Ridley Scott, of *Alien* and *Blade Runner* fame, produced the first commercial for the baby Macintosh in early 1984 the marketing pitch exclaimed 'you'll see why 1984 won't be like 1984' – a claim which many would now dispute. The world was changing, and the surge of interest in Indigenous printmaking can now be read as a key sign of this social and political change, as art across many cultures strove to catch up with a rapidly changing world.

The Indigenous print is therefore a revealing aspect of the larger process of the production and distribution of new cultural forms, enabling the creation of new meanings and values. Out of a sense of social and political necessity, these artists' use of these newly available technologies of visual communication has a particular urgency. In this instance, the character of printmaking as a reproductive process renders it potentially far more significant than the transformations that have occurred through access to the new technologies of painting, or of the earlier introduction of craft processes like batik or ceramics. It is tempting to see this as an echo of both earlier technological revolutions where a new language, or at least a new idiom, emerged out of the discovery of a new means of addressing an audience, this time taking place simultaneously with the digital revolution.

In contrast to the rhetoric of postmodernity, in contemporary Indigenous art the questions of authenticity and originality are construed in an entirely different context. One could argue that if with every mark the Aboriginal artist makes an assertion of both individual and cultural identity, then the question of 'originality' acquires a far more potent political significance. In this sense, despite the loss of traditional media, the adoption of the 'new' technologies like printmaking offered Indigenous artists a new means of affirming the stature and continuity of their culture. Each creative act was therefore an assertion of both cultural and individual identity, and is thus political in essence, whether through the invention or recovery of visual language and form.

It would be naïve not to recognise that the late 20th century interest in new forms of Indigenous art was still motivated by the appeal of the themes of the archaic or the primitive still extant in late Modernism. Previously, innovative Indigenous art had been legitimised as a curious product of a culture defined as 'transitional' – which was a logic of domination and appropriation, assimilatory in character. Now they may be seen as new forms produced by the interaction between cultures, or indeed by the as-yet-unresolved clash of cultures.

The very nature of the reproductive process of printmaking provided one such set of circumstances. Just as the new technologies of painting being used in many Indigenous communities (acrylic paint, a new colour spectrum, the durability and scale of the rolls of the best Belgian linen) all produced new styles and modes of representation, so also a certain innocence may be presumed in relation to the effects of these new technologies. The implications of access to new audiences, or the effects of the institutional or market destinations for their work was not immediately obvious to most Indigenous artists. However in each instance of a printed image made by an Indigenous artist there can be no doubt that a growing awareness of a new kind of audience is inherent in the creative act itself. Whether in community or post-tribal contexts, the new forms generated by these processes have flourished as a consequence of this motivating consciousness, whether or not this was originally political or economic in essence.

Other writers have observed that the technologies of printmaking may be more or less compatible with ('sympathetic' to) traditional forms.[2] By this account, lino-cutting may be seen to approximate carving, and block and screen-printing have been related to stencils, body decoration and fabric

crafts; and scratching and scraping the litho stone seems to parallel other forms of incising traditional materials. Such evocations of 'tradition' as the key referent for the uptake of the new technologies of the printed image reflects a continuing fascination of the tribal as the 'other' to the mainstream sense of Eurocentric artistic traditions. By this account, the pre-modern is characterised as a pre-mimetic form of consciousness, or even a reading of the totemic as a key to the subconscious. Alternatively, following Nicolas Bourriaud's concept of the *altermodern,*[3] one could argue that this is a situation where the Other of Tradition is reconciled through the social interactions taking place in the contemporary cultural domain, made possible by the introduction of a new technology.

In the realm of connoisseurship and museum culture, there is a constant motivating impulse towards the acquisition and thus conquest of the 'unknowable' by the sophisticated modern mind. With Indigenous art, the attractiveness of a knowledge beyond language, or beyond orthodox interpretation of the aesthetic object, leads to the projection of imaginary meanings and associations which carry strange and unsubstantiable values. This tendency reflects the perennial appeal of mythology, of primeval and lasting values, in contrast to the impermanence and pace of change of modern society.

Yet the value judgements inherent in such notions of tradition are transparent: the assumptions of superiority which result from a history of imposed authority, from the decoding of language and knowledge, or the many forms of cultural appropriation and projection. More commonly, this exists as a kind of cultural tourism that power and wealth render 'natural' to the relations of coloniser and colonised, and to the (reassuring) contrast between apparently static and dynamic cultures.

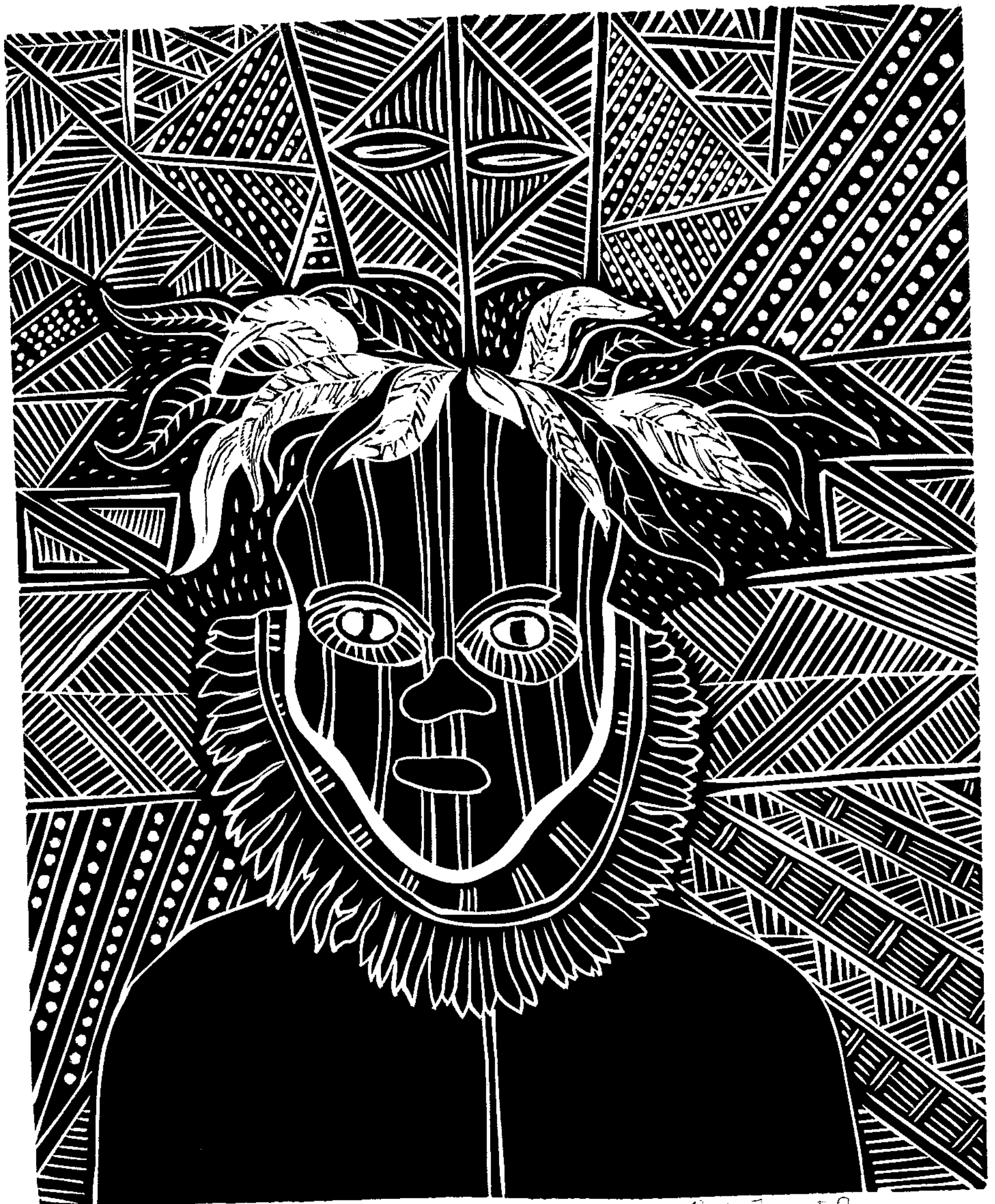
However in the new Indigenous medium of printmaking there are unprecedented affirmations of cultural dynamism and individual expression. From a cultural context where repetition is natural to narration and other didactic or revelatory modes of communication, the capacity to address the issue of dispersal of an image to multiple audiences, and the recognition of such simultaneity as the antithesis of the unique, individual authoritative account or expression, are all manifested in Indigenous printmaking with great virtuosity.

Consider, for example, how *Self-Portrait, Owl Man*, 1989, a linocut by Bede Tungutalum (Tiwi), and *Bush Tucker*, 1988, a lithograph by Sadie Singer (Indulkana) demonstrate two such approaches.[4] What strikes me as being distinctive about prints such as these is that the use of new technologies has resulted not simply in a translation of traditional forms to new media, but also in the genuinely innovative adoption of new conventions (a kind of naturalism) and new subjects. To encounter a self-portrait and a still life in the printed work of these artists is to recognise that many things are happening simultaneously in the cultural transitions these people experienced. Imagine their first experience of the world of printmaking – involving new levels of sophistication, collaboration, and the teacher/printmaker who seems magically to create multiple examples of your creativity – from strange and exotic machines and processes.

The 109 works in the School of Art collection, by 38 artists, were created through the enthusiasm and dedication of the *maestro* printmakers Jörg Schmeisser and Theo Tremblay. Between 1976 and 1996 they hosted a stream of Aboriginal and Torres Strait artists and students within the Printmaking Workshop, and created a dynamic and exciting inter-cultural environment in which printmaking and creativity flourished on both sides of the cultural divide.

Jörg Schmeisser's engagement with this new 'tradition' began with a meeting with the Djambarrpuyngu man Albert Waradjima, whom he met in 1976 while on an expedition in Arnhem Land with the legendary George Chaloupka.[5] Arriving in Australia just a few days earlier, on his way to a residency at the Humanities Research Centre at the ANU, Schmeisser had only a small zinc plate with

Sadie SINGER
b. Indulkana, SA, 1950
Bushtucker, 1987
lithograph 64 x 48 cm
TT, P/P, signed
ANU School of Art Collection



Bede TUNGATULUM
b. Tiwi Island, 1952
***Self Portrait, Purrikinni (Owl Man)*, 1988**
linocut 50 x 40.5 cm
A/P, TT, LM, BH, BR
ANU School of Art Collection

above:
Albert WARADJIMA
Animals, Emu and Fish, 1976
drypoint, printed in black ink, from one zinc plate
8.0 x 12.4 cm
JS, unsigned
ANU School of Art Collection

right:
Bevan Hayward POOARAAR
b. Gnowangerup, WA, 1939
d. 2004
Turtle and Lizard, 1988
linocut, W/P (7/40)
39 x 31.5 cm
ANU School of Art Collection

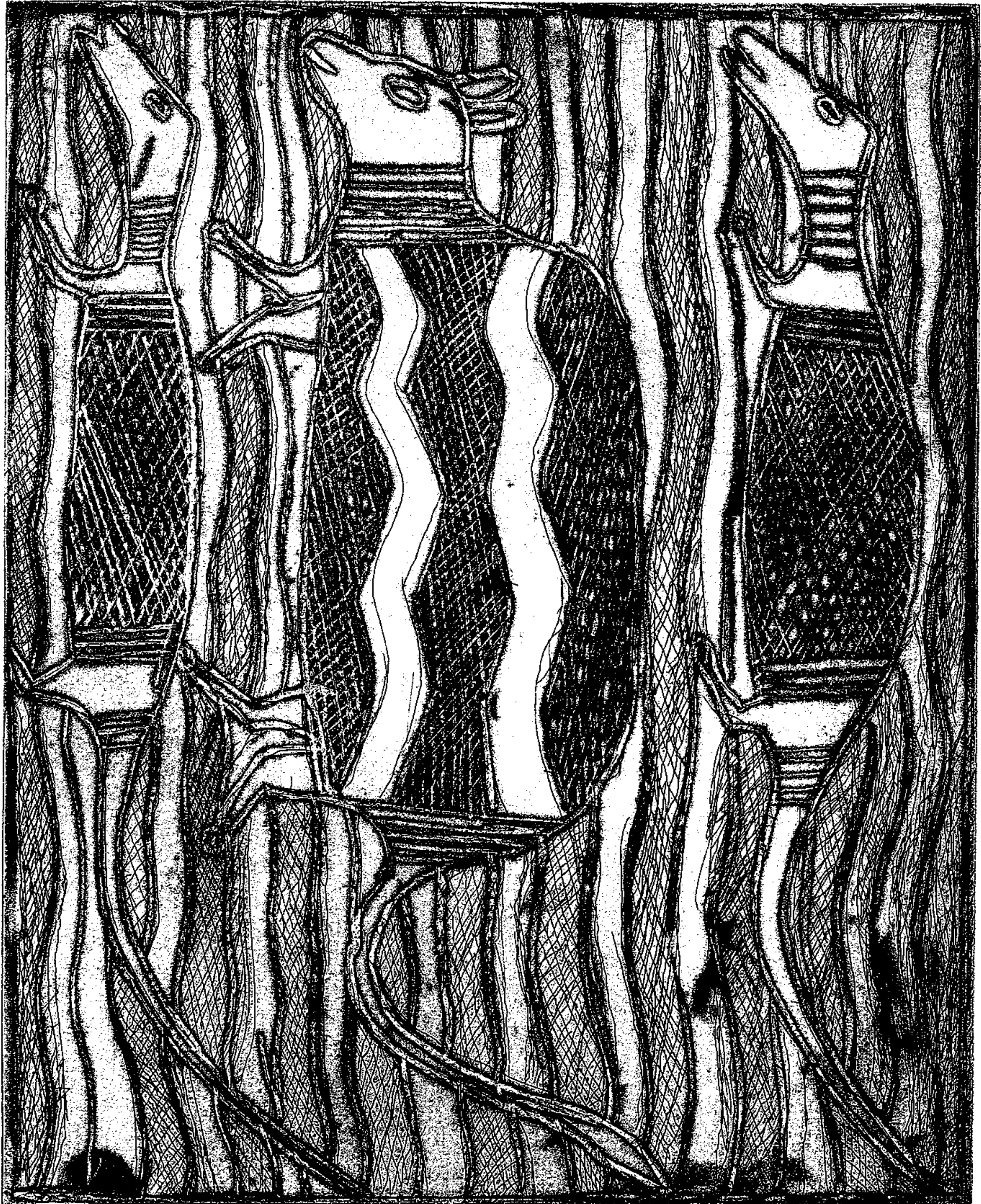
which to explain the implications of Albert's mark-making, and how this might result in 'more than one picture'. With this single gesture Schmeisser made the first small step towards a practice which has burgeoned in a hundred different remote centres and workshops across the country. Two years later the great North East Arnhem Land Manggalili artist, Narritjin Maymuru, came to the ANU as a Creative Arts Fellow, and became the first Aboriginal artist to work within the School itself.

In 1981 the appointment of Theo Tremblay to the School of Art Printmaking Workshop was, for him, 'the crucial point in the development of editioning projects with Indigenous artists. The projects grew out of a genuine desire to offer expertise, share knowledge, to learn and extend a traditional art practice into print and to present those to the widest possible audience'. In addition to visiting artists, this program attracted Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, and the late Bevan Hayward Pooaraar who graduated in 1991, was the first Indigenous student to be awarded a Bachelor degree at the Canberra School of Art. Subsequently, the significant Torres Strait Islander artists Alick Tipoti and Dennis Nona both also studied at the School, and in 2004 the printmaker and sculptor Danie Mellor graduated with the first Indigenous doctorate in the visual arts awarded by the ANU.

Despite these promising first steps, Theo Tremblay relates how he encountered significant hostility when he promoted the idea of Indigenous printmaking to an AIATSIS conference, *Aboriginal Arts in Contemporary Australia*, which was held at the National Gallery of Australia in 1984. Participants in the conference questioned the authenticity of this Aboriginal art in a new medium, warning that such developments would 'pollute the market'. Despite these pessimistic predictions, before long the list of significant artists to visit the Workshop read like a roll-call of the major artists of their

7/0
Print Workshop
'Turtle & Lizard'
Canberra Institute of The Arts
Pooaraar 1988

Narritjin MAYMURU
b. Yirrkala, NT, c.1916
d. 1981
Untitled, 1978
etching, 20 x 24.5 cm
JS, unsigned
ANU School of Art Collection



Narritjin MAYMURU
b. Yirrkala, NT, c.1916
d. 1981
Untitled, 1978
etching, 24 x 19 cm
JS, unsigned
ANU School of Art Collection

generation: John Bulun Bulun, England Bangala, Banduk Marika, Arone Raymond Meeks, Judy Watson, Fiona Foley, and many others. By 1992 Tremblay and others curated the exhibition *New Tracks Old Land: Contemporary Prints from Aboriginal Australia*, which toured Australia and the USA. The exhibition included 120 prints, approximately one third of which were printed at the School of Art. Before long Tremblay went on the road, in his antique Toyota utility, loaded up with his lithographic press and stones. Tremblay preferred to employ the lithographic process, believing it offered the closest analogue to the artists' traditional painting techniques, working in layers from back to front, building up the colours and forms in a way that was familiar to bark painters in particular.

The fact that the acquisition of printmaking skills is still essentially an institutionalised experience (through the agency of art advisers, printmakers, marketing organisations, or in art schools and print workshops) reiterates the question of the degree to which the mythic appeal of a 'primitive' or 'ancient' innocence still operates in those settings. Crucially the role of the intermediary (the adviser, the agent, the printer) and the potential for intervention in the artist's creative processes, remain the critical issues for the long-term analysis of the real value of this development. Just how did the artists arrive at their new subjects (the self-portrait, the still-life) and with what degree of fidelity does the technology translate the trace of the artist's hand onto these new materials? These are new subjects for the consideration of the merit of these artistic outcomes, and new ethical predicaments. This context also recognises the phenomenon of a postcolonialist consciousness, conditioned as it is by late primitivist modernism, through which the desires of those who make the print production possible, who control the technology, become a part of the final outcome.

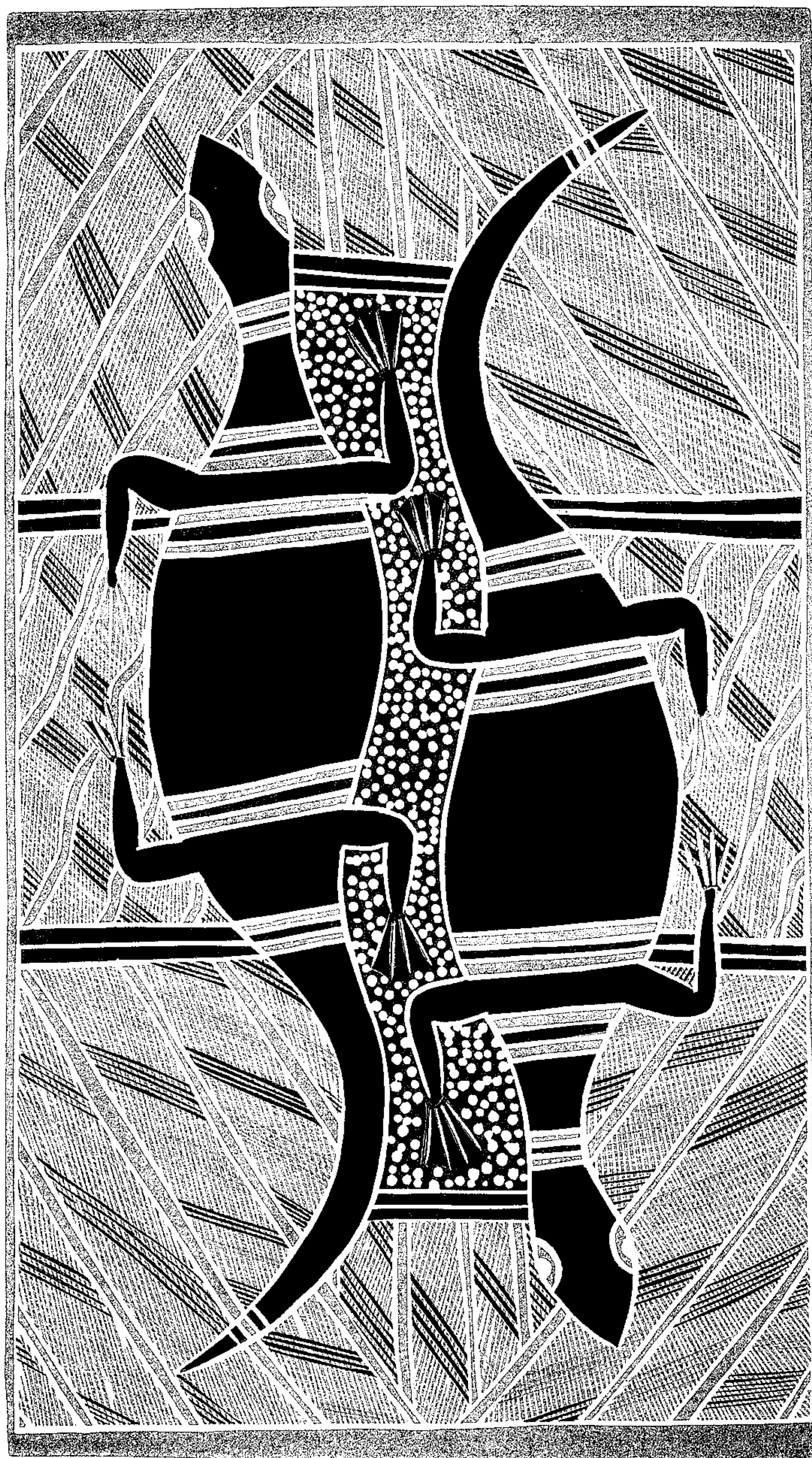
The success of Indigenous printmaking since the production of the School of Art Collection (1976-1995) suggests that the reception of works such as these will not fall into the same traps that beset Albert Namatjira and the Arrernte painters of several generations ago. When those artists adopted the new forms and technology of naturalistic painting in the medium of watercolour on paper, they were vulnerable to the popular judgement that these works were of a lesser order of authenticity and originality from that associated with traditional artefacts.[6] However, the conditions for truly innovative and autonomous uses of image-making technology and the assertion of intellectual and artistic authority are much more promising, and speak of a confident degree of aesthetic independence. History will judge whether the Indigenous print is a significant contribution to Indigenous Australian culture, or to Australian culture and printmaking more generally. The spectacular recent prints of an artist like Dennis Nona suggest the latter.

right:
Johnny BULUN BULUN
b. Maningrida region, NT, 1946
Goonoomoo, 1983
lithograph (stone), A/P
56 x 37.8 cm
ANU School of Art Collection

Notes

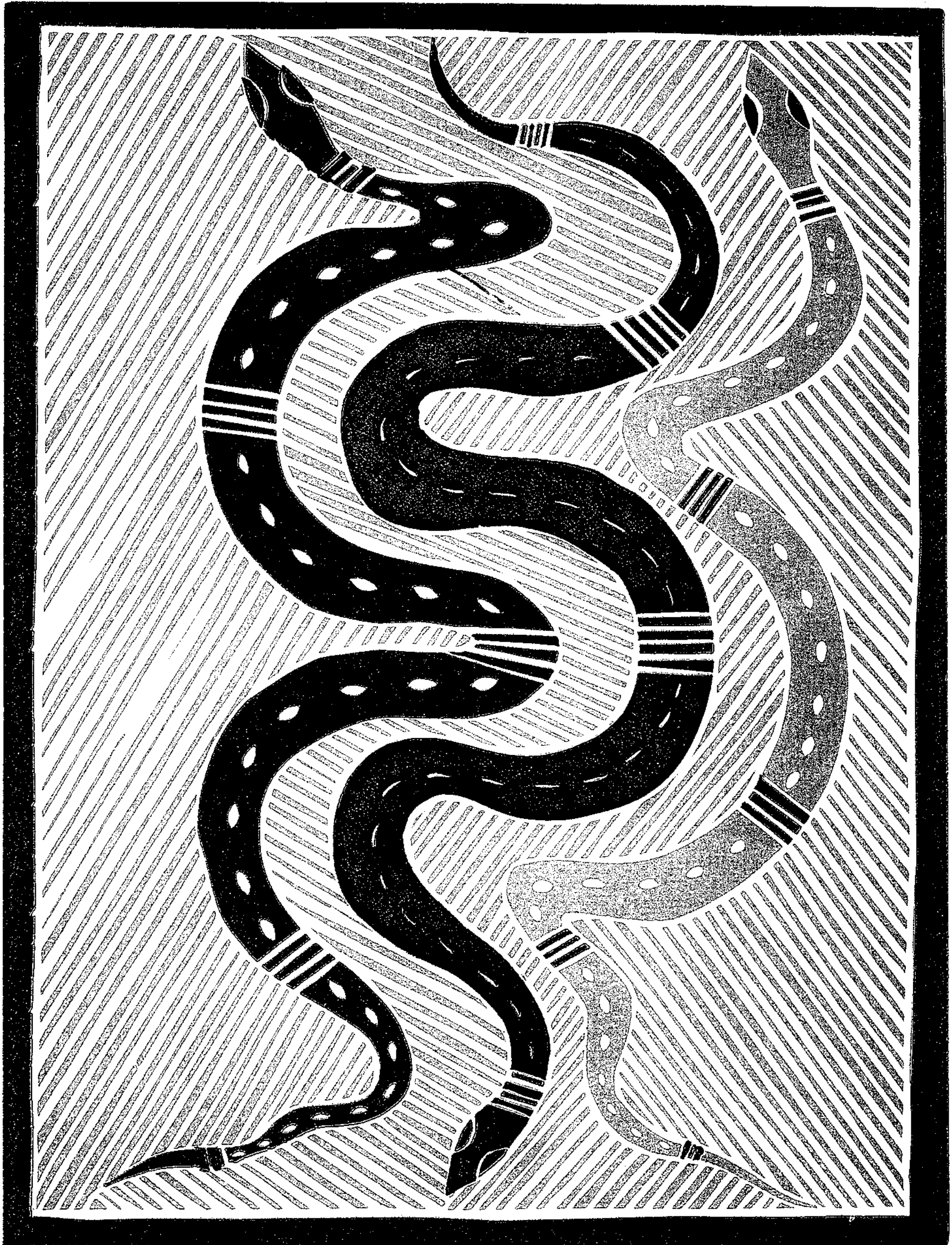
1. See Butler, Roger., 'From Dreamtime to Machinetime', *Imprint*, Vol 21, pp. 3–4, October 1986.
2. See Gilmour, Pat., 'The Potential of Aboriginal Printmaking', *The Tamarind Papers*, Vol 11, 1988.
3. Bourriaud, Nicolas. (ed.), *Altermodern: Tate Triennial*, 2009, Tate Publishing, London.
4. As part of Theo Tremblay's continuing project with Aboriginal printmakers at the Canberra School of Art, Studio One, and in the field.
5. Jörg Schmeisser, 'Groundwork', *op. cit.*, pp.10–11.
6. Interestingly, the vitality of that tradition is now transformed by the women of Hermannsburg in their imagery as decoration on pottery.

The first version of this essay was published with the title 'Black and White: Cultures of the Print', in *Art Monthly Australia*, #23 August 1989, in response to the key survey exhibitions at the National Gallery of Australia, 'Prints and Australia: Pre Settlement to Present', its Drill Hall Gallery companion exhibition 'Australian Prints Now 1985 – 1988', and 'The Bicentennial Folio: Prints by Twenty Five Australian Artists' – all curated by Roger Butler. A subsequent version of this essay was published in 'Groundwork', the *catalogue raisonné* of the collection, and the exhibition held at the ANU School of Art Gallery in March 1996.



right:
Banduk MARIKA
b. Yirrkala, NT, 1954
Djanda and the Sacred Waterhole, 1984
linocut from two blocks,
54 x 30 cm
TT, Pr/P, signed and dated
ANU School of Art Collection

page 189:
Banduk MARIKA
b. Yirrkala, NT, 1954
Untitled, 1985
reductive linocut
33.5 x 25.5 cm
TT and RG, unsigned
ANU School of Art Collection



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